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Year: 2019

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## **The Role of Elections in Switzerland**

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Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-175737>

Newspaper Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

el-Wakil, Alice. The Role of Elections in Switzerland. In: Agenda Pública - El País, 18 October 2019, online.



Firmado por: Alice El-Wakil

viernes 18 octubre 2019

## THE ROLE OF ELECTIONS IN SWITZERLAND

The Swiss political system is often described as a *direct* or *semi-direct* democracy because of its referendum and initiative processes. These processes enable citizens to cast a ballot in popular votes on national laws and policies up to four times a year. By doing so, majorities of voters can overrule the decisions made by elected authorities. Which calls the question: **why, then, bother to participate in election votes?**

The reasons are worth highlighting. The belief, used as an argument by portions of Swiss citizens to justify not turning out in election votes, that **voting in popular votes alone is sufficient to foster democratic representation is at best naïve**. At worst, the notion that *direct* mechanisms circumvent *representative* processes can serve to hide the responsibility of elected representatives in designing and adopting common laws and policies in ways that undermine their accountability.

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Indeed, even in Switzerland, elected representatives are the main actors setting the political agenda. Swiss civil society actors (parties, interest groups, associations, citizens) can certainly trigger popular initiatives and propose a new constitutional law that will be decided by a majority of voters; but this process takes a lot of organizational and monetary resources, and a lot of time –often several years between the start of the process and the popular vote. Furthermore, voters only have the opportunity to overturn a small percentage of the many laws and policies adopted by these actors. Sure, mandatory referendums ensure that all constitutional changes are accepted by majorities of voters. In addition, civil society actors can trigger facultative referendums to put specific policies to a popular vote. But, in reality, **the number of policies challenged in a popular vote is very low** compared to the total number of new policies adopted.

Therefore, in order to ensure the representation of their preferences and interests, citizens should not only rely on the hope that majorities of voters will adopt new proposals made through popular initiatives, or will cancel what they consider as bad decisions from elected representatives. Selecting representatives who might not make such bad

decisions in the first place, and who share voters' concerns about the issues to be dealt with in the next four years is a faster, and more efficient way to get the legislation done.

To be sure, voters can have other good reasons to abstain. But this decision should not be taken on the basis that *direct democracy* can replace *representative democracy*: **voting in popular votes does not replace voting in elections**. Rather, both processes of mass voting **complement one another**. Swiss voters can select their favored candidates to legislate over a number of years *and* cast their ballot in popular votes to spontaneously correct possible failures of representation on specific issues; they have two ways of taking part in collective decision-making processes. We can only hope that they will make use the opportunity to select candidates who share their views and objectives this Sunday.

DEMOCRACIA PARTICIPATIVA

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## COMPARTIR ESTE ARTÍCULO

## AUTORÍA

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